

28.

"Karma is quietly collecting its debts, each small return a reminder of my past missteps. And what scares me most is the sinking feeling that this is only the beginning of what I owe."

How could she be calm enough to get herself drunk when he was being blasted online?
How could she...

"Dad," Mara's small voice cut through his raging thoughts. Hunter's eyes ickered down to his three-year-old daughter, who was clinging to his legs and staring up at him with those innocent, large blue eyes. "Mommy is wed again," Mara said, her childish tone twisting the word "weird" into "wed." His brow furrowed. Again? Meaning this wasn't the first time she'd gotten drunk in front of her? His anger, which had lessened just by looking into Mara's eyes, arched back up as quickly as it had faded.

"She almost tripped on my toys ear-wee-er (earlier). I...was scared." Her lips quivered, and Hunter's anger escalated even more when Carla let out another laugh.

Despite his anger begging to be let out, he squatted to Mara's height, his hands gently cupping both sides of her face. "Would you be a good girl and go upstairs for a minute?" Mara nodded quickly and dashed up the stairs. He didn't take his eyes off her until she had disappeared from view. Then, with a slow turn, his gaze landed on Carla, who was grinning and swaying on her feet, clearly unaware of the storm brewing within him.

"You drank in front of a child? Hunter's voice was low, but the seething fury behind it was unmistakable. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Carla shrugged. "What's wrong with that? Can't I celebrate in peace?"

"Celebrate?" His brows furrowed in confusion. Was there some celebration he was oblivious to?

"Yes," she slurred, her face lighting up like a child's as she staggered closer to him. "We're everywhere, Hunter. Can you believe it? The media is talking about us." She laughed hysterically, and Hunter felt another surge of anger boil inside him. What?

"That... that was why you got yourself drunk?" He couldn't believe his ears. "Because we're all over the news? Did you..." He took a few steps toward her until they were chest to chest, but the overwhelming stench of alcohol caused him to step back again, clenching his fists, his muscles taut with frustration, before continuing.

"Carla," he said, his voice strained as if each word caused him physical pain "I thought something had happened. God, I was terrified something had happened, only to find you drunk?" His voice rose with the last words, unable to keep it controlled anymore.

Carla blinked at him, swaying slightly, her brow furrowing as if confused by his anger.

"If you had taken a second," Hunter continued, forcing his voice to remain even, "to look at the other side of that news, instead of drowning yourself in alcohol, you'd realize how it's affecting me—financially and mentally."

He wanted to scream just thinking about the stress he had endured during the board meeting. Almost all the shareholders and investors were backing Estelle. Only a few, whom he had managed to sway with a huge sum of money, were supporting him, and they weren't enough to outweigh Estelle. It was a headache he didn't know how to overcome, while Estelle just sat there with a blank look, seemingly unfazed. He shook his head, not wanting to go down that road.

"What are you saying?" Carla's face twisted with irritation. "That I'm the cause of all your problems? You think Estelle wouldn't have?"

To be clear, Estelle was nothing like that. She wouldn't have. In fact, all the attention their marriage had gotten—status aside—was because of him. He had brought the spotlight to their relationship. But with Carla, it felt like karma was paying him back for his past mistakes, little by little. And he feared this was just the beginning.

"That's it, isn't it?" Carla's voice rose, her eyes narrowing in accusation. "You think of me as a mistake."

"I didn't say that." Hunter groaned, rubbing his temples. Not this again. Not especially when he was already getting himself convinced it was. The woman he had given up everything for wasn't even the slightest bit appreciative, making him question everything. Was choosing Carla the wrong choice?

"Don't lie!" she screamed. His shoulders stiffened as he heard a soft whimper. His eyes darted to the stairs, where Mara sat behind the banister, watching them with wide eyes, fear etched across her tiny face. How long had she been sitting there? How had he not noticed?

"You wish you were still with Estelle, don't you?" Carla spat, her voice dripping with venom as Hunter's eyes snapped back to meet hers. "That's what you really want, isn't it? But you're too wrapped up in your cowardice to even decide what you want!" she screamed, and Hunter hesitated, his eyes ickering to where Mara was hiding. "You don't even know what you want. You're so blinded by your greed that you can't even see it."

Hunter clenched his fists tighter, his knuckles whitening as he fought to keep his anger under control. He wanted to shout back, to defend himself, but all he could think about was Mara, sitting there, watching everything unfold. This is not what she should be seeing.

"You're just like your father," Carla said, her voice quieter now but no less venomous.

Hunter's gaze snapped back to her. "What did you say?"

Sensing his anger, Carla straightened, "You heard me!" She leaned toward him in a challenging way, her previous drunkenness seemingly evaporated. "You think I don't know why your father wanted you to marry Estelle and never me? You think I don't know?" Hunter's brow furrowed deeply, his body rigid with tension. His fists clenched, and he felt like a time bomb, ready to explode any minute from there. "You're just like him. Like father, like son—both greedy—"

That was it. Hunter's control snapped. In one swift movement, he raised his hand, his body trembling with anger. He had never felt this way before and never wanted to strike someone, but the rage was overwhelming.

A shrill cry

Mara's scream pierced the tension, freezing Hunter in place. He looked up to see his daughter standing at the top of the stairs, tears streaming down her face.

Shame ooded him instantly, washing away the anger in a cold, heart-crumbing wave. Never in his entire life had he been so consumed by his anger that he nearly lost control. And the first time he did—it was in front of his daughter.

He lowered his hand slowly, guilt weighing heavily on his chest. He turned and exited the room without a word, ignoring the insults Carla hurled at his back. All he could hear, all he could think about, was Mara's tearful voice echoing in his ears.

What was he becoming?